

## Environmental Assessment for

# *“Guidelines for Living with Florida Panthers and the Interagency Florida Panther Response Plan”*

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service together drafted the “Guidelines for Living with Florida Panthers and the Interagency Florida Panther Response Plan.” The goal is to ensure public safety and conserve and help recover the endangered Florida panther. Specifically, the guidelines and plan will help people understand what it means to live within or near panther habitat, and the steps they can take to avoid panther interactions. Furthermore, the response plan outlines a framework for responding to panther and human interactions should they occur. Public education and outreach are key parts of this collaboration.

We propose to issue the guidelines and make the plan the official protocol for how the three agencies will respond to interactions between panthers and humans. To this end, the Fish and Wildlife Service developed an Environmental Assessment of the guidelines and plan, which is now available for public review. We seek comments on this document to ensure the best available information and ideas are incorporated. The comment period on the Environmental Assessment ends on **July 24, 2006**.

The Environmental Assessment analyzes three alternatives.

- **Alternative A**, the preferred alternative, includes the Guidelines for Living with Florida Panthers and the Interagency Response Plan, which would create an interagency Response Team charged with evaluating human-panther interactions and taking actions based on established protocols and guidelines that consider panther behavior and human activities.
- **Alternative B** does not establish an interagency team or a response plan, and responds to panther-human interactions on a case-by-case basis without established protocols or guidelines.
- **Alternative C** includes a response team and plan with more rigid

protocols based on frequency of panther sightings and proximity to human-occupied structures, without considering panther behavior.

### Summary of the Guidelines and Response Plan

The preferred alternative in the Environmental Assessment of the Guidelines and Response Plan:

- Outlines the role of the Response Team, whose members include law enforcement officers, wildlife biologists, and public information officers. The Response Team will review information related to panther-human interactions, classify these situations based on the documented behavior of the panther, provide a timely action plan to the responsible agencies, and take approved action. The agencies will meet annually to review the previous year’s activities and make changes to the plan, if needed.
- Establishes an Oversight Committee including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service southeast regional director, the refuge manager of Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, the National Park Service southeast regional director, the superintendent of Everglades National Park, the superintendent of Big Cypress National Preserve, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission executive director.
- Identifies agency responsibilities within the varying geographic areas of Florida panther habitat.
- Classifies and defines interactions between humans and Florida panthers into six categories:

Sighting	Incident
Encounter	Threat
Depredation	Attack



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- Identifies protocols for how the Response Team will investigate an interaction between a panther and humans.
- Outlines what actions the agencies will take for each of the six classifications. For example, if a panther’s behavior indicates a serious threat to human safety, it will immediately be permanently removed from the population. Alternatively, a sighting of a panther in its natural habitat, behaving naturally, would not necessarily initiate panther removal or relocation.
- Outlines an outreach plan for the agencies to better inform the public and minimize interactions between humans and panthers.

The public is invited to download the guidelines and plan at [www.fws.gov/verobeach](http://www.fws.gov/verobeach) and provide comments by **July 24, 2006** to [pantherresponseplan@fws.gov](mailto:pantherresponseplan@fws.gov).

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